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STEPHEN KING THE STAND



No Man's Land

AGUIRRE-SACASA

PERKINS

MARTIN

MARVEL
LIMITED SERIES
6 of 6

STEPHEN KING THE STAND

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PREVIOUSLY IN THE STAND

Four months ago, something happened at Project Blue in California. Within weeks, a flu-like virus—"Captain Trips"—swept through the world, killing off 99% of the population. Now, it's up to the survivors to piece together a new life in a world that has moved on.

For the first time in months, things in Boulder are starting to look up. But a darkening shadow has fallen over the Free Zone, cast by an insidious alliance that threatens to stamp out whatever good has come to them. For weeks now, Harold and Nadine—directed by the Dark Man—have plotted the destruction of the Free Zone and everyone in it. And on a balmy, quiet evening, with all the Free Zone Committee assembled for a meeting, it looks like they'll have their chance.

From their outpost in the mountains outside of Boulder, Harold detonates the explosive hidden in Ralph Brentner's house. But a moment before the blast—some would say by a miracle—news of Mother Abigail's return brings most of the Committee outside...

and not a moment too soon. What could have been a massacre is merely a tragedy. Nick Andros and Susan Stern—two of the founding Free Zone Committee members—are killed in the blast.

In the aftermath, Harold and Nadine flee towards Las Vegas, where the Dark Man awaits them. And the rest of Boulder is left to wonder just how far the shadow of Randall Flagg will fall... and how dark it will get.



SEPTEMBER 3.
TABLE MESA DRIVE, BOULDER, COLORADO.

By eight o'clock, the street outside Larry's house was lined with people keeping vigil, waiting for news.

*Was she alive? Dead? Dying?
Or, perhaps, healed by the
power of God? Had she
said anything?*

*Larry watched from Abigail's
bedroom window, thinking:
Deathwatch out there,
deathwatch in here...*

*The dry, sickly smell coming from
her made him want to puke, but
this was his penance for escaping
the blast unharmed.*

*Same old Larry, he thought.
Keeps his head while others all
around him are losing theirs.*

How's
she doing,
Lucy?

The
same.

She's got
something to
say. She came back
to tell us something,
and God won't let
her die until
she does...

Larry could barely face her.
He felt he was further from
being a good man than ever.

Lucy,
I...

I sent
Kadine to
Harold...

She came to
me for help, and
I turned her away,
and they...

It's
all right,
Larry...

He groped for
her--held her,
shuddering.

Let it come,
Larry. Let it
come out...

I love
you...

He cried. The tears
were as hot and
hard as bullets.

Lucy--

My God,
Lucy, what is
all this...?

Behind them, Mother Abagail
breathed harshly, barely holding
on, in the depths of her coma.

LATER.

Goleman lamps were lit; the vigil continued; and talk turned, hesitantly, to the dark man.

If Mother Abigail dies, does that mean *he's* stronger?

I hold *he's* Satan, plain and simple. We're living out the Book of Revelation right in our own time...

If those bad dreams come back, I'll kill myself.

In mine, I was in a subway station, and *he* was the ticket-taker, only I couldn't see his face. I was scared. He chased me into the subway tunnel...

In mine, I was going down to the cellar to get a jar of pickled watermelon, and I saw someone standing by the furnace. Just a shape, but I knew... it was him.

Crickets began to chirrup. Stars spread across the sky. Drinks were drunk. Pipes and cigarettes glowed in the dark. Talk continued...

If the Power People don't get the lights and heat on pretty quick we're going to be in a peck of trouble.

I guess we're safe for this winter. No way Flagg can get over the passes. Too full of cars and snow. But after the snow...

Suppose he's got a few A-bombs? Or more vials of that super-flu?

At ten o'clock, Stu Redman, Glen Bateman (limping because he'd been injured in the explosion) and Ralph Brentner moved among the assembled, talking quietly and handing out flyers.

FREE ZONE MEETING
MUNZINGER
AUDITORIUM
SEPTEMBER 4
8:00PM

That seemed to be the signal to leave. People drifted away silently, into the dark, to get what sleep they could...

Perchance to dream.

THE NEXT DAY; THE MEETING.
BRAD KITCHNER:

We're going to switch on the electricity tomorrow, the whole shebang.

By nightfall, so I'd like to have you all home and--

What about the hardcase out west?

A voice from the crowd. A moment of dead silence.

He's not going to be able to finish, thought Stu, but then--

My business is power, whoever said that. But I think we'll be here long after that other guy's dead and gone. If I didn't think that, I'd be wrapping motors over on his side, who gives a shit for him?

I do-- we do!

Let's talk about the dark man! About Flagg! It's long overdue, I'd say!

Roars of approval at that.

All right, let's talk.

Yesterday, we poked around the ruins and found the remains of a dynamite bomb wired to a walkie-talkie... We found another walkie-talkie in Sunrise Amphitheatre, and we assume the bomb--

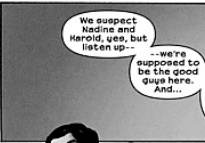
Assume nothing--

--it was that bastard Harold Lauder and his little whore!

An uneasy murmur went through the room.



They don't care about Nick and Sue and the rest, Stu thought. They're like a lynch-mob, and all they care about is hanging Harold and Nadine...



We suspect Nadine and Harold, yes, but listen up--

--we're supposed to be the good guys here. And...

...I guess we know where the bad guys are, and we'll get to that, but first, let's hear from Doc Richardson about Mother Abigail.



Doc?



She is the oldest human being I have ever seen and treated.

For the last two weeks--the time she was gone--I surmise she's been living on roots, herbs, grass, and the like.

One of her arms is covered with poison ivy. Her legs are covered with ulcerations.

She's comatose, malnourished, and very, very old. If she were anyone else, I'd say she's certainly going to die, but...like all of you, I dreamed of her.



If this woman is from God, He may choose to heal her... but I cannot.

I will tell you that the fact that she is still alive at all seems a miracle of sorts to me. That is my statement. Any questions?



There weren't.

Next, Stu introduced Glen Bateman, to discuss the topic on everyone's mind.

The dark man's name seems to be Randall Flagg, although some people have associated the names Richard Frye, Robert Freemont, and Richard Freemantle with him.

The initials R.F. may have some significance, but none of us on the Committee know what it is.



Heads were nodding; an exciting hum of conversation broke out as Glen continued:

His presence-- at least in dreams-- produces feelings of dread, disquiet, terror, and horror. In case after case, the physical feeling associated with him is one of coldness...



This Flagg is in the West, crucifying people in Las Vegas, or Los Angeles, or San Francisco, or Portland-- there are conflicting reports.

Many people believe--Mother Abagail among them-- that there is a confrontation shaping up between this man and ourselves...



And that Flagg will stop at nothing to bring us down. Including nuclear weapons and, perhaps...plague.



I'd like to catch hold of that dirty bastard!

I'd give him a dose of the everloving plague!



Glen grinned at the tension-relieving laughter that burst from the crowd. He'd given Rich Moffat his cue line a half-hour before the meeting started and Rich delivered it beautifully.





This man has to be dealt with. Mysticism isn't a field of mine, but I tell you this: I think Mother Abagail somehow represents the power of good as much as Flagg represents the forces of evil...

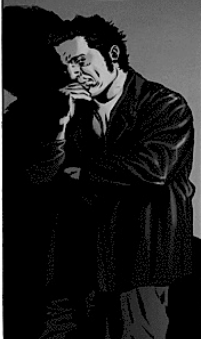
I think the power that controls Mother Abagail brought us together and doesn't intend to forsake us now...



Maybe we need to talk it over and let some air into our nightmares...



Maybe we need to begin by deciding what we're going to do about him...



But he won't just walk into the Zone next spring and take over, not if you people are standing watch...



Glen's last sentence was lost in a crash of applause.



The assembled were more mad than scared, and ready (it seemed) for a challenge...

Also...they were ready to talk.

And talk they did, for the next three hours.

A few people left at midnight, but not many. Many wild suggestions were made, as Larry suspected would happen. Few of them are practical.

For the final hour, person after person stood up and recited his or her dream, to the endless fascination of the others.

Stu was reminded of the endless bull sessions about sex he had participated in (mostly as a listener) during his teenage years.

Glen was heartened by the charged atmosphere of excitement that had taken over. A large catharsis, long overdue, was going on.

The inner terror Flagg sowed in sleep was finally harvested in this marathon public discussion, and became more...manageable.

The meeting broke up at one-thirty in the morning...

...and left Glen feeling good for the first time since Nick's death. He left feeling that they had taken the first hard steps out of themselves and towards whatever battleground there would be.

He felt... hope.

SEPTEMBER 5.

The power went on, just as Brad had promised.

The air raid siren atop the county courthouse went on with a huge, braying whoop...

There was an electrical fire on Willow Street, readily put out...

A manhole cover exploded into the air at Broadway and Walnut...



Stu was with Frannie when the lights in her room buzzed into life.

He watched them for a full three minutes. When he looked at Fran again, her eyes were shiny with tears.

What's wrong, Frannie?
Is it your pain?



It's Nick...
It's *go wrong*
that Nick isn't
alive to see
this...

I want to pray for him, Stu, if I can... I want to try, at least...



He held her, not knowing whether she prayed or not, not knowing how she was managing all of the pain in her body.

He suddenly found himself hating Harold Lauder more than ever. He hadn't just killed Nick and Sue and the others. He had stolen their light.

Stu--
Fran--



It's Mother Abigail. She woke up and wants us. What's left of the committee.

She knew
Nick and Sue were
dead... Somehow,
she knew...



That night was cold. Outside, a frosty moon hung overhead, making Larry think of Tom. God knew where that moon was looking down on Tom, on Payna Jurgens, on Judge Farris...

God knew, he thought, it was looking on strange doings here, tonight...

If the doctor wanted you up and around, Fran, he would've released you--

It's not so bad--

Junhhfft

I took some Advil. Just don't ask me to do the hustle--

She can't talk above a whisper, but she's perfectly understandable--

They went into the death-room together...

...and Mother Abigail's bright gaze fell upon them.

Little girl, sit down. You're in pain.

Quick with child, too.

The dry, attic smell in the room reminded Frannie of... her mother's parlor.

Yes,
how did
you...?

Shhhhhh... Look out
the window,
little girl....

Frannie
did.

*The same one Larry had been
staring out the last few days,
but what she saw...*

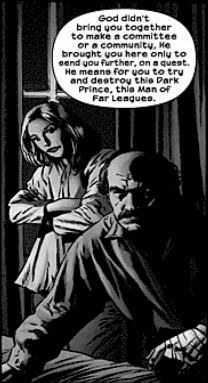
*Once the vision
had faded:*

But...
where's the
baby? Why was
the room
empty?





God will dispose
as he sees fit. You
are not the potter, but
the potter's clay. Mayhap
the man in the West is the
wheel on which you will
be broken; I am not
allowed to know...



God didn't
bring you together
to make a committee
or a community. He
brought you here only to
send you further, on a quest.
He means for you to try
and destroy this Dark
Prince, this Man of
Far Leagues.



I thought
Nick was to lead
you, but He's taken
Nick-- though not all
of him is gone, it
seems to me.

Go Stuart
must lead...



And if it's
He will to take Stu,
then Larry must lead.
And if He takes Larry,
it falls to Ralph.

Looks like
Glen Bateman's
riding last in
this car...

Wait--!



--you want them to deliver themselves
into his hands? Go Flagg can crucify
them and walk in here next summer and
slaughter all of us? Well, no, I won't
see my man sacrificed to your
killer God!

Frannie--



Millions, maybe
billions, dead in
the plague! Isn't your
God done yet? He-- He's
no God! He's a demon!
And you're
his witch!

Little
girl--



The old woman
grasped Frannie's
wrist--

--and, in a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity, it happened:

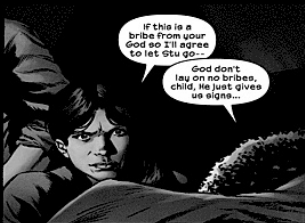
Gone...

The pain, the whiplash...the pain in my back...from the explosion...it's all gone...



If this is a bribe from your God so I'll agree to let Stu go--

God don't lay on no bribes, child, He just gives us signs...



You four are to go west. Stu, Larry, Ralph, Glen. You are to take no food, no water. You are to go this very day, in the clothes you stand in. You are to go on foot. I am in the way of knowing that one of you will not reach your destination, but I don't know which one.



The rest of you will be taken before this being Flagg. I do not know if it is God's will for you to defeat him; I do not know if you will ever see Boulder again...

But he is in Las Vegas, and you must go there, and that is where you will make your stand. You will go, and you will not falter, because you will have the Everlasting Arm of the Lord God of Hosts to lean on. Yes...



With God's help, you will stand.



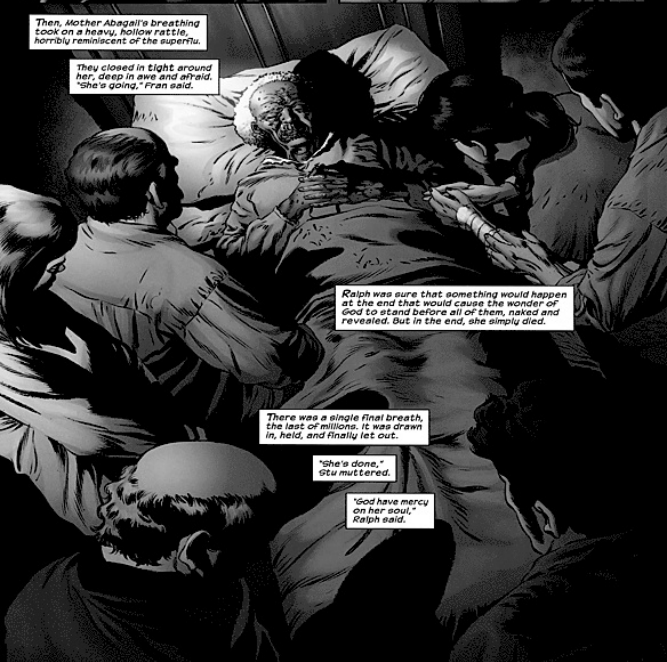
That's all. I've said m'piece.



Do
we have a
choice?



A choice?
There's always a
choice. That's God's
way, always will be. Do as
you will, there's no set of
leg irons on you, but...
this is what God
wants of you.



Then, Mother Abigail's breathing
took on a heavy, hollow rattle,
horribly reminiscent of the superflu.

They closed in tight around
her, deep in awe and afraid.
"She's going," Fran said.

Ralph was sure that something would happen
at the end that would cause the wonder of
God to stand before all of them, naked and
revealed. But in the end, she simply died.

There was a single final breath,
the last of millions. It was drawn
in, held, and finally let out.

"She's done,"
Stu muttered.

"God have mercy
on her soul,"
Ralph said.

Ralph was
the first:

Says in the
Bible that David
did the job on
Goliath...

I'll go to
Vegas.

Me...

Me, too.
Okay.

I'll go,
too. She was
right...

White magic...
That's all that's
left.

Stu...
Please, Stu,
say no...

Frannie...I
have to go.

And die.
You're a dead
man, Stu
Redman...

You're a
corpse...

FLAGSTAFF MOUNTAIN,
SEPTEMBER SIXTH.

The picnic after their long vigil had been Fran's idea, but there was a strange, awkward silence between them.

Stu found himself thinking of Arnette, of the old car carrying Charles P. Camplon and his load of death, crashing into Bill Hapescomb's pumps like some wicked Pandora...

Fran--

Good food,
good meat,
good God,
let's eat.

And they
did.

An hour later, Fran
was ready to talk
about it.

My mom
was big on
the Bible...

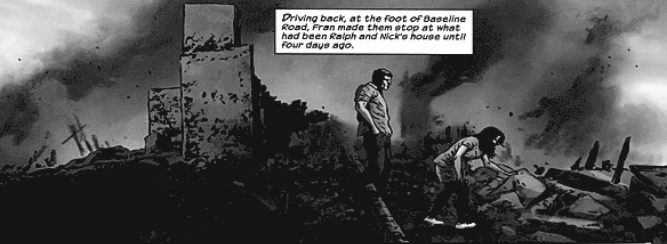
Job was a
bet between God
and the Devil. The Devil
said, "Sure Job worships
you, he's got it soft. Make it
rough enough for him, for long
enough, and he'll renounce you..."

So God
took the
wager...and
won.

God always
wins...God's a
Boston Celtics
fan, I think...

...
Maybe it
is a bet...

Driving back, at the foot of Baseline Road, Fran made them stop at what had been Ralph and Nick's house until four days ago.



There was a patch of dried blood on the house's back steps.

Is that Nick's blood?
Could it be?

I suppose....

She made him put his hand on it. (The gesture gave him a ghostly, crawly feeling.)

Now swear you'll come back.

Fran,
how can I...?

God can't run all of it! Not all of it! Swear, Stu, swear it!



Frannie, I love you...

...and I swear I'll try.

...
I guess that will have to be good enough, won't it?



LARRY'S HOUSE.

Fran and Lucy watched the undramatic start of their quest from the front steps.

They had no packs, no bedrolls, no special equipment, as per instructions.

They had all changed into heavy walking shoes.

Kojak? Here, boy--

The dog was going on the trip, too.

Let's go, then.

Before I lose my nerve.

Lucy's face was shiny pale.

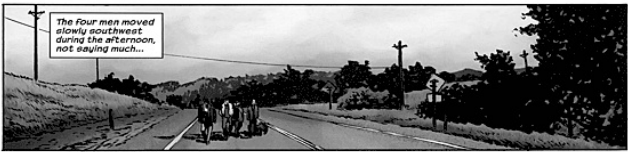
Bye, Larry.

Remember, Stuart.

Remember what you promised.



With those words... the waiting began.



The four men moved slowly southwest during the afternoon, not saying much...



They passed by three burial sites--graveyards Harold Lauder had helped dig...



Chapter Forty-Three, the Bald-Headed Sociologist Pons His Sweetband...



Kojak had just crossed the line separating Boulder from Golden...



Behind them was a little warmth, a little love. Ahead of them was darkness.

Ah, man, I feel like this is the end of everything...

For a moment, Stu had a feeling that they were on the verge of turning back, and that...wouldn't do.

Come on. Po you dogfaces want to live forever?

At that, they resumed walking...



*By nine that night, they were camped
in Golden, half a mile from where Route
Six begins its twisting, turning course
into the stone heart of the Rockies.*

*None of them slept
that first night.*

*Already they felt far
from home, and under
the shadow of death.*

**TO BE CONTINUED IN TWO MONTHS WITH
THE STAND: THE NIGHT HAS COME #1!**



















Next: "When the night has come, and the land is dark..."



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After killing off 99% of the world's population, the superflu known as Captain Trips has left the survivors to pick up the pieces. But now that the dying are dead, those who remain have begun to separate into the light and dark. Those on the side of light have gone to Boulder, Colorado, where a peaceful society has been formed. Those on the side of dark have followed the beckoning of the Dark Man to Las Vegas, where he rules with a cruel hand. But not all of the citizens of Las Vegas are bad and not all of Boulder is good.

A showdown is coming, true believers, and in the space between light and dark there is a no man's land.

Based on the popular apocalyptic novel by celebrated author Stephen King, *The Stand* brings together critically acclaimed writer Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa (*Sensational Spider-Man*, *Angel: Revelations*, HBO's *Big Love*) and the gritty visuals of artist Mike Perkins (*Captain America*) to tell a tale that begins at the end of the world.



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